

***For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the LORD: They would none of my counsel: they despised all my reproof. Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices.
(Pro 1:29-31)***

As we continue to pilgrim in this wilderness, occupying as ambassadors of our Lord and King, keeping ourselves focused on the right things is paramount. If we are going to occupy until the end, and be prepared for the return of our King, that requires us to develop and exercise the skill of discernment.

Discernment is defined by Merriam Webster as

- 1: the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure : skill in discerning
- 2: an act of perceiving or discerning something

And it further defines *discern* as

- 1a: to detect with the eyes
- 1b: to detect with senses other than vision
- 2: to recognize or identify as separate and distinct : discriminate
- 3: to come to know or recognize mentally

Too frequently, discernment is discussed as simply knowing hard things, or telling right from wrong. But that is not a sufficient scriptural perspective. It is simplistic and ignores the importance of it.

Discernment is not simple worldly wisdom. There is more involved in demonstrating discernment in service to the King than just showing some intelligence or wisdom in matters of the world. There is earthly wisdom that comes from scriptural wisdom, certainly, but discernment is more than that. Solomon's wisdom was rich in both, up until it unfortunately wasn't and his discernment stopped driving his behavior. You can be full of worldly wisdom and have not a lick of spiritual discernment.

Charles Spurgeon has been quoted as saying:

"Discernment is not knowing the difference between right and wrong. It is knowing the difference between right and almost right."

Spurgeon articulates a very important distinction that is necessary for us to grasp and be very mindful of in these times. The biggest differences at times come from the smallest distinctions and the hardest lies to detect contain a dose of truth.

Remember these words of Christ regarding the end times:

“For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.” (Mat 24:24)

The possibility of deceiving the elect isn't just some theoretical or abstract idea. In the teeth of this statement is a whole world of trouble. It's trouble that has to be considered and watched for by the elect, with earnest prayer made to the Lord; wrapped up in this statement is the truth that the non-elect **will** be deceived. I'm not talking about some notorious sinner here – there's no deception needed to get them to follow Antichrist. These who will be deceived likely have made professions. There may be even in these pews those who will be beguiled and deceived by the “almost right”. Falling to that deception is an indicator that they were not – in actuality – the elect. Which should make us all consider Paul's dire warning

“Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” (1Co 10:12)

We delude ourselves if we presumptuously think “we'll know, no one can hide that from us, they can't survive in our enclave of holiness”. It chills me to my very core to think about being deceived into following a false Christ in my heart while I keep outward appearances. Consider this passage from that perspective:

“And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.” (Mat 22:12-14)

You can be deceived in your heart and it not be displayed to men – even men with excellent discernment. But at the wedding supper of the Lamb no one will be permitted to stay who have no wedding garments on; there will be no deception that the Bridegroom falls victim to, because He is the greatest discerner of all (as we'll see later).

There is no “safety in numbers” here. Consider closely the danger described for the church at Pergamos (where the doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitanes were held), the church at Thyatira (where a Jezebellian woman taught false doctrines and idolatry), the church at Sardis (where complacency displaced watchfulness), and the church at Laodicea (where zeal had fallen cold). If I were to synthesize the reason for these dangers, it would be a failing to discern the state of things around them, the state of their own faithfulness to the King, and the state of their ambassadorship. Ultimately, I believe they fail to discern the Lord's body (1 Co 11:29). It is both individuals within these bodies and the bodies as a whole which are at risk of these dangers.

Being aware of the dangers caused by not improving our ability to discern what is “almost right” – and therefore not aligned to the standards of God – should occupy a lot of our thinking.

To structure this discussion, we will look at each verse a variant of “discern” is used in the New Testament and use other translations of the same Greek word that should help us shine light on what it means to have discernment.

The first verse under consideration in this effort is

*“To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another **discerning** of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues:” (1Co 12:10)*

G1253	διάκρισις	<i>diakrisis</i>	discerning, discern , disputation
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I want to address this usage first, as it is one of the gifts of the Spirit, and it could be easy to misunderstand and think that all discernment is dependent upon being touched by the Holy Spirit or possibly be an Apostolic gift that doesn’t exist today. Discernment in general isn’t what is meant here. That’s an important thing to understand. This is a unique thing that is put on display here:

“But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God.” (Act 5:3-4)

Understand that this wasn’t a hindsight thing. This wasn’t Peter sitting around after watching this unfold and going “man, I just knew something was up, he just looked weird when he came in and put that money at our feet”. This wasn’t analysis of a whole bunch of behaviors suddenly adding up to something. This wasn’t interpreting body language. This wasn’t the result of any interrogation. There is a working of the Holy Spirit here imbuing Peter with a knowledge that ordinarily is hidden from men – understanding the man’s spirit and what was going on in his heart before he even came in the room or said anything! There was consideration and assessment of Ananias and Sapphira’s hearts against the plumb line of honesty using information that is normally reserved for the Lord alone. That’s not a gift I’m aware of anyone having today.

Take careful note here as well, that there was no berating of Ananias or Sapphira, there were simple questions asked that were based on facts Peter knew the answers to. He knew, he didn’t detective it. This discerning of their spirit doesn’t give license to

mistreat people. None of the Spirit's gifts do. The unique gift puts on display the need for knowledge in discernment, but "discerning spirits" is a distinct thing.

This version of the word is only used three times in Scripture. The second is:

*"Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful **disputations**."* (Rom 14:1)

Here the word is translated "disputations". This gives us insight into what is going on here with discernment. Discernment requires an expenditure of mental energy.

Thayer's dictionary tells us that in translating the word *diakrisis*, part of what is meant is judgement "*not for the purpose of passing judgment on opinions, as to which one is to be preferred as the more correct*".

Exercising and going through the effort of discerning the truth of a matter or "right from nearly right" isn't to be done for the purpose of forensic distinction or arguing of opinions. Discernment is about gaining understanding of God's will through the Scripture.

The third place *diakrisis* is used is here

*"But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to **discern** both good and evil."* (Heb 5:14)

This verse is in various expositions I believe misapplied to mean that only elders or old people have an ability to discern good and evil. In this sense, "full of age" doesn't necessarily mean years of life. It's easy to understand that when you look at the reality on the ground – there are plenty of old people who are leading people straight into the depths of hell, refusing to exercise proper or any discernment.

This is talking about spiritual maturity. You can be a relatively young person and have spent years having your senses exercised and your spirit tested such that you have a strong sense of discernment. That shouldn't puff anyone up or cause anyone to think more of their spiritual understanding than they should. What this should drive everyone toward (even old people) is to more stringently exercise their spiritual senses so that their discernment is of a greater quality. The more your spirit is exercised, the more important you will see discernment is because you will more clearly see the constant state of danger of being devoured by the roaring lion who is our enemy (1 Pe 5:8).

Discernment is an important enough characteristic of His people that Christ twice directly called it out. This is one reason why I think we need to take real notice of the idea and dig into what it means for us.

First we will examine this verse

*“And in the morning, It will be foul weather to day: for the sky is red and lowring. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not **discern** the signs of the times?” (Mat 16:3)*

G1252	διακρίνω	<i>diakrinō</i>	doubt, judge, discern , contend, waver
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The Greek *diakrino* is also translated discerning here:

*“For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not **discerning** the Lord's body.” (1Co 11:29)*

Thayer's gives several definitions for diakrino, including

1. To try, discriminate, distinguish
2. To learn by discrimination, to decide a dispute
 - a. To withdraw from one
 - b. Oppose, strive with, dispute
 - c. Be at variance with oneself, hesitate, doubt

In Matthew, Christ is rebuking the Pharisees and Sadducees for seeking a sign from Him. They made a challenge of His credentials and tempted Him to behave – as they would were they so challenged – with some prideful mic drop sort of moment.

To the Pharisees and Sadducees, the directive is to look at the events around them, compare them to the Scripture that they knew intimately and provide guidance to the people about the momentous events taking place. It was their responsibility to explain the fulfillment of the prophecies that is standing right in front of them, rather than disputing with Him, and it should have been simple for them to do were they truly as versed in and understanding of the word as they claimed to be. They had a non-transferrable responsibility as the spiritual leaders to instruct the people in these things. To evaluate, discern and then teach, proclaiming the truth of what they have discerned from the word about what they see. This shows a clear responsibility for religious leaders to carry that mantle of discernment shedding true light on the word.

Consider for comparison these verses where the same source word is not translated discern

*“And of some have compassion, making a **difference**.” (Jud 1:22)*

*“But let him ask in faith, nothing **wavering**. For he that **wavereth** is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.” (Jas 1:6)*

It's easy when you read Jude 22 to think of "making a difference" as meaning you're changing something with compassion, but that's simply not what it means. It means making a distinction in how to handle a person in a bad situation. Look at the greater context:

"But, beloved, remember ye the words which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; How that they told you there should be mockers in the last time, who should walk after their own ungodly lusts. These be they who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit. But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, Keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh."
(Jud 1:17-23)

This is about discerning the best words to use from scripture to be complete in our duty to a person, a nation, even the whole – whether to use words of compassion or words of fear. All out of mercy and not out of spite or contention. Operating with that discernment in those moments is incredibly important; it requires spiritual maturity and recognition that to do this properly you must be *"a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth"* (2 Ti 2:15).

Consider James, where *diakrino* is translated "wavering". This is an important thing. You have to make a decision based on your discernment. Christ does not abide fence sitting. We cannot "halt between two opinions" (1 Ki 18:21). Study, pray and stand with Christ, or don't. But if you're not going to, don't call yourself a Christian. Those who do the work in the vineyard are going to receive this element of grace, to discern the things needing clarity in these dark days. That's part of His promises to us, that if we do the work, we will be rewarded.

Let's go back to 1 Corinthians 11. Ben hit on something last week when he talked about Christ's death being about more than the forgiveness of sins. Considering and understanding those various elements is part of discerning His body. That discerning is just as necessary and *incumbent upon us to do* as it is to discern the signs of the times. It requires us to thoughtfully inquire into all the elements of His sacrifice, the reasons for it, the outcomes secured by it, the ancillary effects of it, etc. And we're provided all we need to do that! Just as the Pharisees and Sadducees had all the prophecies and all the learning to put together the pieces regarding Christ's first advent, so we have the tools to discern the signs of our times **and** His body. The Lord doesn't leave His people without the tools necessary to please Him!

Now let us turn to the second time Christ exhorts to discernment, this time in Luke, where a different word is used

*“Ye hypocrites, ye can **discern** the face of the sky and of the earth; but how is it that ye do not discern this time?” (Luk 12:56)*

G1381	δοκιμάζω	<i>dokimazō</i>	prove, try, approve, discern , allow, like, examine
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Thayer’s defines *dokimazō* in two ways

1. To examine, prove, scrutinize
2. To recognize as genuine after examination

Consider that this is not the Pharisees and Sadducees being spoken to here – it’s a different event, not a retelling of the same one from Matthew. Christ had just delivered some specific words to His disciples building on His parable of the watchful servant, and in verse 54 it explicitly says *“And he said also to the people”*.

So he’s talking to everyone in general at that moment. And He’s laying out, via this rhetorical question, that it is incumbent on all the people to understand and apply Scripture to the time in which they live.

It’s a similar exhortation to what is given to the Pharisees, but the difference I believe is significant. He isn’t talking about the “signs of the times” that leaders have a responsibility to watch and deliver a bigger message from. He’s talking about individual responsibility to look at what’s right in front of your face and understand it through application of Scripture.

We don’t get to sit back and say “well, it’s the responsibility of the elders to determine what’s going on in the world and tell us what to do”. As elders we certainly have a responsibility to the body to guide and call on the Holy Spirit for unity in what we do, but that doesn’t absolve all of you from looking diligently into these matters **on your own** and discerning their veracity and truth and speaking often one to another about them.

Other passages where the same word is not translated “discern” support this idea – see if you agree.

We are increasingly familiar with my first example because it occupies much of our discussion these days:

*“And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may **prove** what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” (Rom 12:2)*

The “prove” here isn’t prove like convince others with evidence at trial. This is in an individual context – we aren’t all mentally connected, we can’t do this as a groupthink exercise. Each of us must continually do this – discern what is “that good, and acceptable and perfect, will of God” through a renewing of our minds accomplished in part by refusing to be conformed to this world. We have to conform to God’s will by understanding it – by understanding the Word! That’s where we find what is good and acceptable!

Another example of this point is here:

*“But let a man **examine** himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.” (1Co 11:28)*

How much more individualized can this get? This examination is that careful weighing of the facts on the ground, *especially the facts of your heart which no one else can possibly know* and making considered, exacting examination of your state to determine your worthiness to eat and drink. That is a heavy burden, but it is a **requirement** of us that we do that work. This requires, more than simple knowledge, honesty and integrity to make the proper examination. It requires that union with Christ Ben spoke of recently. It requires not ignoring the Christian duties enumerated throughout Scripture to chase the things of the flesh. It requires more attention to yourself and the state of your spirit than a cursory check-in the 5 minutes immediately before a church service.

I believe this passage sheds a little more light on *dokimazō*:

*“And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; That ye may **approve** things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.” (Php 1:9-11)*

Here *dokimazō* is translated “approve”. Interestingly, the “judgment” of verse 9 is **defined** as discernment, and it is only used this one time in all of Scripture. Paul’s prayer is that they would understand the excellent things of Christ. The encouragement being that they rejoice and be overjoyed in them as they increasingly gained understanding of Christ’s excellency. That takes discernment to see and then rightly despise the things of the world and actually **see** Christ’s excellency. You’re comparing the two and elevating the one you see as truly excellent.

This next verse highlights the importance of this mental activity and how it looks as part of a practical activity:

*“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but **try** the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.” (1Jn 4:1)*

“Try” them, that is, test them, don’t just take their “I’m a Christian” statement on its face. The default position pointed at here is to **not** just accept some words. Someone claims to be Christian – try them. Not with haughtiness, nor with anger or malice, but in Christ, **discern** the truth of their profession.

One final point on this term that might be helpful. In the Greek *dokimazō* comes from another root word, which means essentially to examine money given to you and to approve of its acceptability. Think of it like the old stereotype in movies where someone handed a gold coin bites it to check if it’s soft and prove it’s gold. In the ancient world coins were the primary exchange medium and coins are super easy and barely an inconvenience to counterfeit. You can coat an iron coin in a thin layer of gold and it looks legitimate, but you bite into it and you immediately know it’s not gold. Like you could literally do this in your backyard if you have a little bit of gold to melt and some washers or other round pieces of metal. In today’s context think of those pens they use to check twenty-dollar bills – discerning their validity.

This is the essence of discernment. It’s not enough just to ponder a thing. If you don’t diligently check and weigh out the payment, you have no recourse, no one to blame but yourself for the consequences of accepting false currency. You’re not only weighing out a matter according to the plumb line of God’s standard, but you’re also doing it as though your very soul depends upon it, and you’re putting everything you can into figuring out how to be the best discerner you can be.

Our next source term comes from this passage:

*“But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually **discerned**. But he that is spiritual **judgeth** all things, yet he himself is **judged** of no man.”* (1Co 2:14-15)

Here we are provided with both a direct translation of “discern” and a comparative one translated “judge”. This very directly lays out that discernment isn’t some fleshly natural intelligence, wisdom or some form of intuitive reading of people, but a spiritually motivated and directed judgement.

G350	ἀνακρίνω	<i>anakrinō</i>	examine, judge, ask question, search, discern
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Thayer’s gives us this about *anakrinō*

“By looking through a series of objects or particulars to distinguish or search after; to investigate, examine, scrutinize, sift; to judge of, estimate or determine”

For me this is one of those critical elements of detecting “almost right”. There are many, many voices in the world today that seek to tell you how judging is wrong. Not just the blatant “worship our pronouns and defy God” foolishness of gender ideology politics, but men who call themselves preachers telling their congregations not to judge, that to “live and let live” is the Christian way. It is appealing to the flesh to just get along, maybe you can win souls by making friends with everyone, by being “winsome” as some preachers say; just agree to disagree on world’s use of “judge not lest ye be judged”.

Scripture can’t contradict itself. It completely aligns, and this passage gives us the answer to that worldly mantra. It doesn’t need a lot of analysis, just simple keeping to the direction – judging according to the spirit, not the flesh. It is our responsibility to scrutinize and determine the truth of things, not shying away from stating what is and is not true in the earth, according to God’s word. And since those things are foolishness to the men of the earth, their interpretation of the word is not relevant and should cause us no distress or consternation to refute it. Judging and discerning according to His word is the job of Christ’s church in the earth. Period.

Which brings us to our final use of “discern”

*“For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a **discerner** of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” (Heb 4:12)*

G2924	κριτικός	<i>kritikos</i>	discerner
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This is the only time in Scripture that *kritikos* is used, which gives it a special place in the analysis, obviously. Thayer’s tells us it means

“tracing out and passing judgment on the thoughts of the mind”

There is some debate amongst expositors as to whether this is a reference to the written word or Jesus Christ. The context seems to me to make this pretty clearly a description of Jesus, not the written word. The word quick there means literally live, living, which is a reference to Christ as the Word (John 1).

I also see this as talking about Christ because Scripture doesn’t discern the thoughts and hearts of men, God does

“Shall not God search this out? for he knoweth the secrets of the heart.” (Psa 44:21)

“Examine me, O LORD, and prove me; try my reins and my heart.” (Psa 26:2)

This verse is the reason why we should heartily undertake the labor Hebrews 4 speaks so much about

“Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it...Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. For the word of God...” (Heb 4:1, 11-12)

It isn't a direct exhortation to us to seek out discernment, but if we are to have the mind of Christ, it is an attribute we should be seeking, a skill a ready workman will have built up through the exercise of his senses, those senses being exercised by constant inquiry in the Word. Earnest laboring begets discernment.

So I go back to where we started:

“For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.” (Mat 24:24)

If we as a body, and we as individuals hope to avoid being deceived, we can't just sit back and say “well, the Lord won't let me or this church be deceived, we're preaching to the whole world”. Remember Judas. He was used as a vessel to deliver Christ's message.

To grow in discernment requires us to be engaged in the battle at every point we are able, because being engaged in the battle includes the training for battle, the learning how to equip ourselves with the armor, and then actually going out and using that armor. Discerning truth from almost truth, believers from almost believers. Discerning all necessary things from a Scriptural view to walk in Christ.

Only by diligent focused effort can we become better at discernment. Only by becoming better at discernment can we be better servants and ambassadors of our King while we pilgrim here. Let us strive to the accomplishing of the work!!

Know that my daily prayer for you all is

“That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness; Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light:” (Col 1:10-12)